

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

COMMUNIST ROADNET IN THE LAOS PANHANDLE



CIA/BI GM 66-4, Revised
May 1966

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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COMMUNIST ROADNET IN THE LAOS PANHANDLE *

Communist movement of men and supplies overland from North Vietnam to combat areas in South Vietnam depends on an increasingly elaborate network of roads constructed in the panhandle of Laos. The network comprises the principal part of the so-called Ho Chi Minh trail, which bypasses the extremely mountainous terrain obstructing direct movement into South Vietnam and also provides a side door into South Vietnam, thus avoiding the Demilitarized Zone. In the past year the Communists have almost doubled the mileage of the roadnet and have successfully established a continuous north-south route that extends from the Mu Gia Pass southward about 300 miles to the vicinity of the Cambodian border. This enlarged network, over which moves a major part of the logistical needs that the Communist forces in South Vietnam obtain from external sources, is very important to Communist capabilities in South Vietnam. Currently, it assumes increased importance in connection with a possible VC-mounted offensive in the highlands of South Vietnam timed to coincide with the impending southwest monsoon, the summer rainy season.

The main access road from North Vietnam is Route 15, which enters Laos through Mu Gia Pass (see FIGURE 1). Current estimates indicate an average of about 75 short tons of supplies have moved through this pass daily from December through the first week of April 1966. Prior to this year the main route southward from the pass area extended along Route 23 to the Sépone (Tchepon) area, thence eastward along Route 9 to its junction with Route 92, and finally southward along Route 92 to the area of Ban Bac. A proliferation of tracks and trails led eastward from Route 92 into the highlands of South Vietnam.

New Communist road construction during 1965-66 has extended the network and also provided alternate routes and bypasses. Route 911 now branches from Route 23 about 25 miles south of Mu Gia Pass, providing an alternate and more direct route to the area west of Sépone. A new road, Route 914, completed 23 March except for a half-mile stretch now connects Route 911 directly with Route 92, bypassing the east-west segment of Route 9. From Route 92 the route now extends south to the vicinity of the Cambodian border. Lateral east-west Routes 922 and 165 extend eastward toward the South Vietnam border from this north-south overall trunk route. Route 110, a new road that extends from Cambodia into Laos, connects with the southern end of Route 96.

An alternative to the Mu Gia Pass entry point, which was bombed by B-52's on 12 and 27 April, will be provided by Route 137/912 between North Vietnamese Route 101 and Laotian Route 911. The amount of work required in the continued camouflage trellising of this road (see FIGURE 2) indicates that the Communists probably hope to use it through the summer rainy season. The precise alignment of the road will become extremely difficult to detect from the air as rapidly growing vegetation covers the trellis during the rainy season. From the point of view of climate the new road has some marginal advantage over the Mu Gia route in that supplies can be moved overland farther south along the coast, which is relatively dry, while the Mu Gia area is receiving the heavy rains of the summer southwest monsoon (see precipitation graphs on map for comparison of rainfall regimes). Supplies might also be moved by coastal boat to the North Vietnam port of Quang Khe and forwarded into Laos over the new route, which would greatly reduce overland distance. The major bypasses elsewhere along the roadnet are those that circumvent the original chokepoint (established by aerial bombing) on Route 12 in Laos, somewhat south of the Mu Gia Pass (see inset on map).

Most of the roads are probably single-lane, all-season roads with partially improved surfaces that deteriorate to some extent during the rainy season (see FIGURE 3). During the last rainy season, June-September 1965, Communist vehicular traffic generally stopped in the Mu Gia Pass area, and supplies were moved southward along Route 23 by porters. Trucks were used to some extent, however, on Route 9 and parts of Routes 92 and 922 during the last rainy season.

Photographic analysis indicates that the truck route from 911 south to the Cambodian border may be an all-weather route to the South Vietnam border that can be used by the Communists during the coming rainy season. The alignment generally follows higher ground that probably will not be flooded. Reportedly, some sections of this route are constructed with rock aggregate or corduroy. After the onset of the impending monsoon season, however, some of the route may revert to stretches of only fair-weather road, in spite of the improvements. Most of the route is aligned through an area that has very heavy rainfall; the area of component Routes 92 and 922 receives an annual rainfall of 120 to 140 inches. By comparison, the Route 23 area probably receives 100 inches of rainfall annually, and during the 1965 summer rainy season this route was impassable to vehicular traffic.

* This report was prepared in the Office of Basic Intelligence. The alignment of the Communist roadnet on the map is based mainly on an NPIC briefing board dated April 1966.

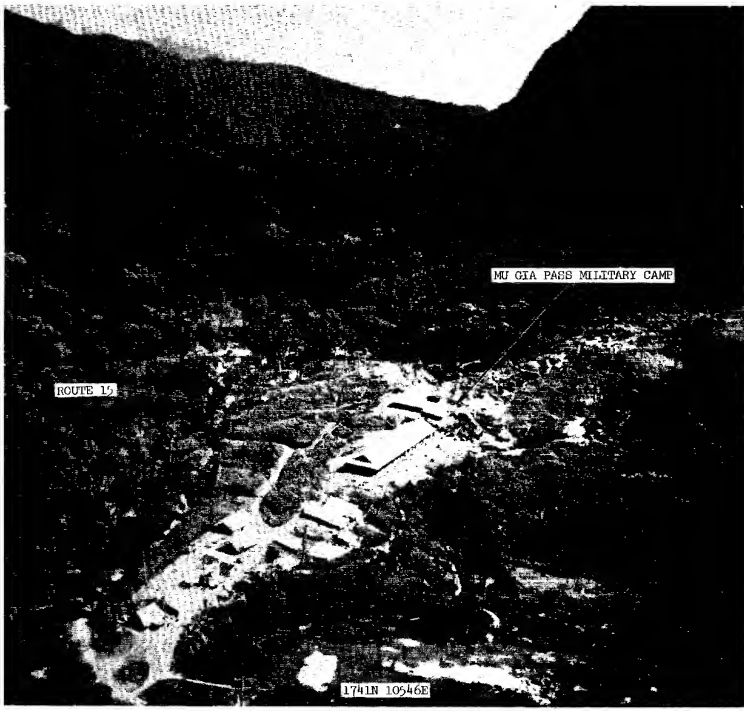


FIGURE 1. MU GIA PASS, NORTH VIETNAM, THROUGH WHICH ROUTE 15 ENTERS LAOS. A segment of Route 15 can be seen in left middleground. The target of B-52 bombing was the gap area shown in background. The military camp buildings in foreground have been severely damaged or destroyed since this photograph was taken in 1964.

FIGURE 2. PARTIALLY COMPLETED VINE-COVERED BAMBOO TRELLIS CAMOUFLAGE ON ROUTE 911, 21 MILES NORTHWEST OF SÉ-PONE (PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN OCTOBER 1965). A similar trellis is being built over much of the new road, Route 137/912 that will connect North Vietnam Route 101 and Laos Route 911. During the impending rainy season, fast-growing vines will completely cover these trellises and make detection of the road alignment almost impossible.

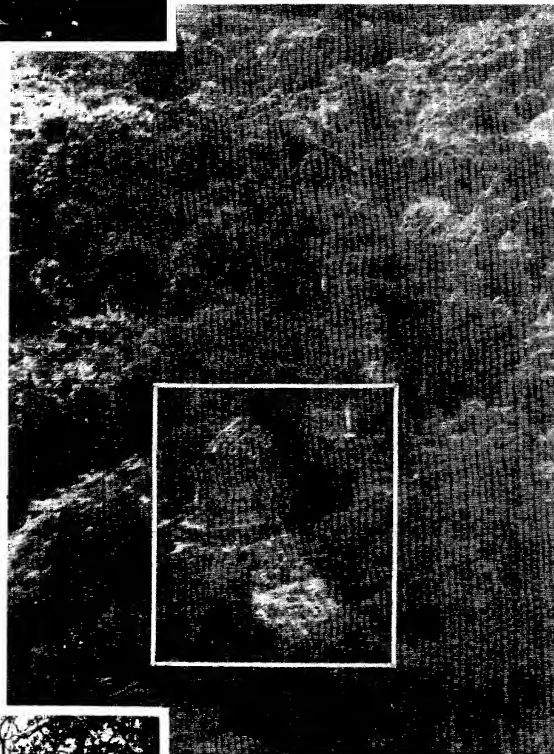


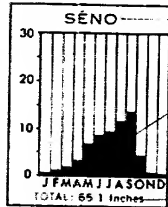
FIGURE 3. CLOSEUP OF UNIMPROVED DIRT ROAD, PART OF ROUTE 911 ABOUT 16 MILES SOUTHEAST OF JUNCTION OF ROUTES 911 AND 23. The road surface will probably become a mire during the summer rainy season, and logs will probably be used for corduroying in an effort to keep the road open to trucks. Rock aggregate may be used on some stretches.



LAOS PANHANDLE COMMUNIST INFILTRATION ROUTES, APRIL 1966

- Main Communist truckable roadnet
- Road constructed 1965-66 (Laos only)
- Other road
- Unusable road
- Trail
- Railroad (Most Vietnam sections inoperable)
- Approximate area of Communist control in Laos

PRECIPITATION

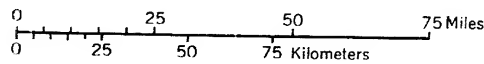


Meteorological station

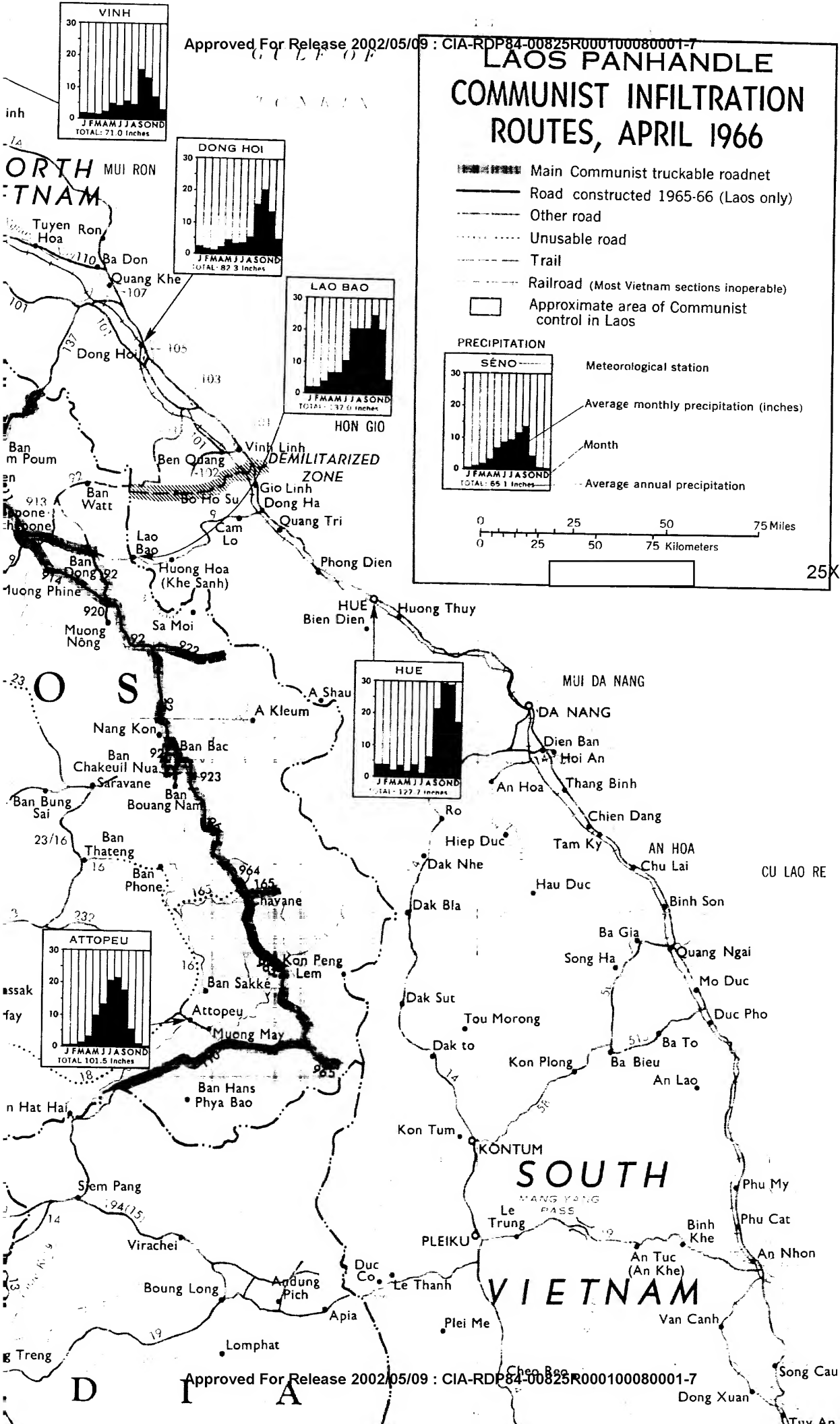
Average monthly precipitation (inches)

Month

Average annual precipitation



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ROOM NO.	BUILDING	
REMARKS:		
<div style="text-align: right;">2 Jun 66</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 250px; height: 40px; margin: 10px 0;"></div> <div style="text-align: right; font-size: 2em;">DDI</div> <div style="margin-top: 10px;"> <i>Requested</i> <i>2 copies - White House</i> <i>6 " - ?</i> </div>		
FROM:		
ROOM NO.	BUILDING	EXTENSION

FORM NO. 241
1 FEB 55

REPLACES FORM 36-8
WHICH MAY BE USED.

☆ GPO : 1957-O-439445

(47)

Roads in Southern Laos and Contiguous Areas of Vietnam

DD/I

REPORT NO.

GM 66-4

[illegible]

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CONCURRENCE		INFORMATION	SIGNATURE
Remarks: Re the attached request, GM 66-4 dated April 1966 has been superseded by GM 66-4 Revised dated May 1966. Copy of the latter is attached; it is also available from Records Center.			
FOLD HERE TO RETURN TO SENDER			
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RTA
SAP

5 May 1966

MEMORANDUM FOR: Deputy Director for Intelligence

SUBJECT: Coordinated Production of Intelligence on Roads
in Laos Panhandle and Adjacent Areas of North
Vietnam

1. Your requirement for the production of a report on road location and status uncovered an area of weakness in the production of coordinated intelligence on roads in Laos and North Vietnam. Different organizations are involved -- e.g., NPIC and DIA -- and their differing interpretations of source materials have led to discrepancies in CIA-produced maps and publications.

2. In order to achieve consensus within the DDI on the Communist roadnet in the Laos panhandle, the D/ORR and D/OBI agreed to convene a responsible group representing NPIC, ORR, OCI, and OBI to establish an agreed roadnet base and to establish a procedure for orderly examination of subsequent reporting of road information.

25X1A 3. The first meeting of the group, called and chaired by [] accomplished the following:

a. Using map no. 53733 in the Intelligence Memorandum, Communist Roadnet in the Laos Panhandle, April 1966, as a base, each road was examined to validate it as "truckable" -- indicating that trucks or truck activity (i.e., tracks) have been observed on the road; to assure that the alignment was correct; and to confirm the route number as CINCPAC-approved.

25X1A b. To avoid discrepancies in CIA-produced maps and publications, it was agreed that if any DDI component becomes aware of a new road, the component will call [] Chief, Far East Branch, Cartography Division, who will seek confirmation on the existence of the road from PAG, NPIC [] and obtain from PAG the CINCPAC-approved route number for the road. If no approved route number exists, [] will coordinate with DIA and indicate a tentative route number which all CIA components will use.

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c. Corollary to item b above, it was agreed that no OBI cartographer will show a new road or segment thereof or use a new route number without [] confirmation. [] Chief, Cartography Division, will issue a memo to this effect to all his Cartography components.

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d. [] will keep a master base map that will show the current road situation. All-Source Branch, Cartography Division, will keep a duplicate of this map which will service after-hours production.

4. A monthly meeting of NPIC, ORR, OCI, and OBI representatives will be convened to maintain the DDI consensus on new road developments. The OCI Weekly will be used to report these road developments.

5. ORR and OBI agree that the NPIC Weekly Summary serves as a valuable input document for an all-source publication such as the CIA/OBI Intelligence Memorandum.

6. A status report on the overall road situation will be issued when sufficient change in the roadnet warrants such publication. At a minimum, the status report will be published seasonally, i.e., the next report will be prepared to show the effect of the summer rains on road development. An Intelligence Memorandum in the same format as CIA/BI GM 66-4 will be used for the status report. This will be a joint memorandum involving all of the Offices of the DDI referred to above.

(signed)

JAMES A. BRAMMELL

JAMES A. BRAMMELL

Director of Basic Intelligence

cc: D/NPIC
D/ORR
D/OCI
CD/BI
GD/BI

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